

Assessments of democracy

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In March, 1948, the governor of the Punjab informed the prime minister of the Punjab (the chief minister was back then called the prime minister) of the “considerable apprehension in the services” about their protection against “arbitrary treatment by politicians”. Only two months later a case of a PCS officer, Manzur Ali, was brought to the notice of the PM: Mr Ali complained of receiving threats from members of the Muslim League in the Mianwali district. They wanted him to commit perjury.

At the centre of it all was an election petition. Nawab Mian Muhammad Hayat Qureshi, who was a close relative of minister Mumtaz Daultana and a Muslim League candidate, had fought and lost the 1946 election against the Unionist Mian Sultan Ali Nangiana. Now the election tribunal was hearing a petition by Mian Hayat against Mian Sultan.

The margin was over 4,000 votes, but Mian Hayat blamed his defeat on the misconduct of civil servants who had made arrangements for the polls. An inquiry had found the allegations to be baseless, however, with ministerial backing, the case was reopened soon after independence. Mian Hayat wanted Manzur Ali to pressurise Sultan Ali into giving up his seat. Manzur Ali was an officer with good service record, who was now faced with two options: compliance or suspension from job and humiliation.

The incident has been quoted from Ilhan Niaz’s *The Culture of Power and Governance of Pakistan 1947-2008*. The writer says: “Sadly, this kind of behaviour, though ultimately self-defeating, was increasingly becoming the norm among the politicians.”

Details such as these help an observer understand the milieu in which democratic development “or lack of it” is rooted. But it seems grass-roots` scrutiny has gone out of vogue.

The Pakistan Institute of Legislative Development and Transparency (PILDAT) has conducted a study called ‘Mid-Term Assessment of the Quality of Democracy in Pakistan — March 25, 2008, to Sept 24, 2010. The report covers answers to some 75 questions, but it does not take into account some of the facets that make up the politics here.

The picture cannot be complete without drawing on the family and dynasty factor and the abuse of power. It cannot be complete without the personal accountability of the players in the parliament. It would be worthwhile to see how careful the current batch of legislators has been to, say, not use the police for their personal, group or party's vested interests.

Also, perhaps it was out of the scope of this PILDAT report to reflect the anti-Punjabi line taken up by the other three provinces. But there are questions that come to mind as one attempts one's own assessment of the quality of democracy over the last three years or so. Was the name of a province changed through a democratic resolution and was it democracy that helped the government decide that Kalabagh dam was not in the interest of Pakistan?

Questions abound... About the linguistic issue that has so far eluded the studies about quality of democracy in the country as regionalism is blatantly promoted. About, our inability to hold referendums to resolve crucial issues. Why has the 18th Amendment failed to provide for a referendum? We could have a few of them, for instance a referendum on agrarian reforms. And what about Section 63(a)-1? What about the use of regional cards and the insistence of Mr Asif Zardari to hold on to both the presidency of the country and that of the PPP? Is this, or the PPP's relationship with the `Musharraf parties`, quality democracy?